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ABSTRACT

With the myriad challenges facing parents in recent years, formal parenting training programs have been developed to address parent needs. However, few studies have been conducted to assess the actual effects of participating in such programs. An attempt to develop a better understanding of how informal parental support networks and formal parent education programs influence participants' perception of child behavior is reported in this paper. A multi-modal self-report measure was developed to assess the effectiveness of some of these programs. A search for formal programs to participate in the planned comparative assessment revealed that formal parenting programs were generally reluctant to administer the survey to their participants. The majority (78%) of programs that expressed initial interest refused to administer the self-report battery of standardized measurement instruments to their program participants. The primary reason cited for nonparticipation was the fear of negative program publicity. Concerns about protecting potential parent participants were also expressed. Some of the challenges that future researchers may encounter when trying to scientifically evaluate parent education programs are described here. (RJM)

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The Challenges of Evaluating Formal Parenting Programs

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Abstract

The original purpose of this project was to develop a better understanding of the effects of informal parental support networks and formal parent education programs upon participants' perception of child behavior, styles of discipline, and satisfaction in parenting. Upon the request of a formal parent education program, a multi-modal self-report measure was developed to assess the effectiveness of these programs. This brief battery included the most reliable and valid measures reviewed in the literature. In the ensuing search for additional formal programs to participate in this comparative assessment, it became increasingly evident that formal parenting programs were generally reluctant to administer the survey to their participants. The majority (78%) of programs that returned the researchers' initial inquiry phone calls, refused to administer the self-report battery of standardized measurement instruments to their program participants, despite the fact that several initially agreed to contribute to the project. Due to this resistance, the assessment of formal parenting groups was not possible. The primary reason cited for nonparticipation was the fear of negative program publicity. The purpose of this report is to inform future researchers of the challenges involved in scientifically evaluating parenting education programs.

Introduction

The challenges facing parents have increased in recent years as a result of myriad factors, including increased workplace demands, social isolation, and rapid societal changes. It has become commonplace to question the authoritarian discipline approaches of the past, and for parents to strive for a more close and mutually satisfying relationship with their children. Simultaneously, parents are expected to prepare their children for what many expect to be an increasingly competitive global economy. This often results in higher performance expectations of children, and pressures on both parents and children to function more competently. Societal factors, including challenges to the traditional notion of motherhood and fatherhood, have exposed contemporary parents to a wide variety of theories about child-rearing. Professionals offer parents an often contradictory picture of what constitutes optimal parental response. In response to this, parents often feel the need to look to others for reassurance and advice on child rearing. Formal parenting training programs have been developed as one way of addressing this need. However, while many schools and churches have recently started offering such formal assistance, very few studies have been conducted to assess the actual effects of participating in such programs. Without evidence of program efficacy, it is difficult to attract participants and the funding necessary to expand such programs.

The original plan for the current research project was to

administer a battery of standardized measures of parent effectiveness to participants of formal parenting programs, parents participating in informal support meetings, and a control sample of parents without either type of group involvement. The project was developed at the request of a particular parenting education program, whose board members wanted objective evidence of their program's effectiveness in order to promote the development of external funding streams.

A literature search was conducted in order to find the most effective, standardized method of assessing parent effectiveness. It was determined that in measuring program effectiveness of parenting education, the use of self-report instruments is the most efficient means, especially when time, labor, and financial resources are limited. Since changing parents' perceptions of their own competence and confidence, and improving their satisfaction, are common objectives of parenting programs, subjective self-report ratings are appropriate measurement tools.

Additional formal parent education programs were contacted for comparative purposes. Operationally defined, formal parent education programs included regularly scheduled classes in which there is a certified instructor and a structured curriculum.

Perceptions of children's problems, styles of disciplining, and parenting satisfaction were assessed through use of the Parent Effectiveness Battery. This battery is a packet of the self report measures obtained through review of the literature, and selected on the basis of the following criteria: (1) availability of research

demonstrating that the instrument possesses suitable reliability and validity, (2) brevity appropriate for inclusion in a battery containing multiple measures, (3) nonredundancy with other selected measures, (4) face validity as a measure of parent effectiveness or satisfaction, and (5) a history of use in published professional research on the parenting process. The final paper-and-pencil test battery included the Cleminshaw-Guidubaldi Parent Satisfaction Scale, the Eyberg Child Behavior Inventory, the Parenting Self Appraisal Scale, and a measure of Daily Behavioral Responses.

The Cleminshaw-Guidubaldi Parent Satisfaction Scale is a self report measure of satisfaction with a parent's relationship with their child and the satisfaction with spouse's parenting, especially in discipline. High scores indicate greater difficulties. Guidubaldi and Cleminshaw (1985) have established the reliability and validity of their original measure. For this study, a subset of sixteen of the original 4-point Likert format items were used. Pilot validity testing showed that this revised scale was significantly correlated with its longer predecessor (r=.76), while taking substantially less time to complete.

The Eyberg Child Behavior Inventory (ECBI) (Robinson & Eyberg, 1980) consists of thirty-six items that assess conduct problems of children from two to sixteen years old. It has high test-retest reliability (r=.86) and internal consistency (r=.98). The scale measures whether a listed behavior is a problem for the child and the frequency at which it occurs on a scale of 1 to 7 (Webster-Stratton, 1982).

In addition, the Parenting Self Appraisal Scale and a measure of Daily Behavioral Responses, created by the authors, concentrated on the parents' appraisal of their own parental behavior, both generally and in response to common everyday conflicts with their children. This scale consisted of 10 likert-style items that measured parents' self-appraisal of their parenting enjoyment. It also contained three open-ended items requesting parents to describe their typical responses to daily situations that frequently present parenting challenges (e.g., strategies used at bedtime). This qualitative data was coded by trained raters using a four category classification scheme developed previously (Gustafson et al, 1996), which ranged from very permissive to very authoritarian.

Results

When presented with the final version of the Parent Effectiveness Battery, the original requestor of the assessment refused participation. This decision seemed to be the result of internal conflicts among program administrators, and competition between the individual who originally initiated the project and the new director of the program. Unfortunately, this presaged the resistance met later when attempts were made to recruit participants from several other parent education programs.

In addition to the initial rejection from the requestor, seven out of nine (78%) formal programs approached refused participation. Many program managers initially approved administration of the

battery, but then withdrew consent prior to the administration of the measures. The two programs the consented to participate throughout the program were unable to administer the measures to a sufficient number of parents, because of a combination of very low class enrollment and high attrition.

The procedure utilized to locate parent education programs was to place phone calls to all locally advertised parenting programs. The initial problem encountered was failure of many of the programs to respond to numerous phone calls, which limited the sample to the nine that could be contacted. Many parenting programs are conducted on an extremely limited budget, and few can afford staff to cover the phones consistently. However, even among those with answering machines, many programs were unresponsive to the initial research inquiry.

In addition, some of the facilitators already assessed their own programs informally, and did not perceive a need to use more standardized assessment tools. When faced with the prospect of a pre-post test format, still other programs were not suitable for inclusion because of their continuous nature; many had participants starting at different times, and/or continuing to participate for an indeterminate time period (functioning more as ongoing support groups in these cases).

Several of the programs that initially expressed interest in the assessment later refused participation after viewing the survey. Their change of heart was apparently due to the impression that some parents might find it intrusive to be asked questions

about their children's problems and their style of discipline, despite assurances of anonymity and confidentiality.

Other program managers seemed to veto participation because of anxiety about the prospect of a negative program evaluation. While many programs were initially enthusiastic about the possibility of being able to demonstrate their effectiveness in helping parents and their children with data obtained through inclusion in this research project, it seems that as time went on, they realized that the same data might not support an entirely flattering picture of their program's value.

Coupled with a tendency to protect their programs' reputation seemed to be concerns about protecting potential parent participants. In explaining why they had declined to participate, several program managers mentioned not wanting to disrupt or discomfort the parents by asking about negative issues. Many of the programs approached seemed to be struggling to attract sufficient enrollment. Many may have felt that any task perceived as onerous (such as completing these forms) might have led to further attrition from their already dwindling programs, and they were all working hard to maintain a reasonable class size. Although efforts had been made to keep the battery quite brief, the fact that it ran four pages long (one page of demographic information and the three 1-page instruments; see Appendix) may have seemed intimidating. Use of even more condensed measures may have increased the level of program participation.

As discussed, there are many challenges involved in attempting

to assess formal parent education classes. In addition, there are many problems that are inherent in the method of self-report proposed here; therefore, integration of self-report and direct observation may be a more successful technique to use in future research. However, given these programs' reluctance to participate in this relatively convenient form of program evaluation, it seems unlikely that they would extend themselves in the ways necessary to permit collection of observational data about parent-child interactions.

These formal parenting programs have been developed to address the problems of harried parents with too many obligations and too few hours for involvement in informal social support networks, which previously offered parents the support and guidance they needed. The irony is that because their target parents are so overextended, few can find the time to participate in these programs. Without objective assessment of their value, these formal parenting programs are unlikely to be successful, but fears about the risks of alienating participants by having them complete standardized measures contribute to many of these programs' unwillingness to participate in outcome evaluation.

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This survey will collect information pertaining to child behavior and parenting satisfaction. All information will be kept confidential, and your name will in no way be linked to this research. Thank you in advance for your time and cooperation. Please fill out this survey as completely as you can even if some of the items do not apply to you. If you have more than one child, please describe your most challenging child.

Sex: M F Age:

Marital Status: Single Married Divorced Widowed

Please list all of your children's:	Ages	Gender
	_____	_____
	_____	_____
	_____	_____
	_____	_____
	_____	_____

Family Employment:

	Type of Job	Hours Worked per Week
Mother	_____	_____
Father	_____	_____

Please describe the following parenting styles:

	Very Permissive 1	2	3	4	5 Very Authoritarian (Strict)
Your Mother's	1	2	3	4	5
Your Father's	1	2	3	4	5
Your Spouse's	1	2	3	4	5
Your Own	1	2	3	4	5

EYBERG CHILD BEHAVIOR INVENTORY

Directions: Below are a series of phrases that describe children's behavior. Please (a) circle the number describing *how often* the behavior *currently* occurs with your child, and (b) circle either "YES" or "NO" to indicate whether the behavior is *currently a problem.*

Please describe your most challenging child

	How often does this occur with your child?							*Is this a problem for you?*	
	Never	*Seldom*	*Sometimes*		*Often*		*Always*		
1. Dawdles in getting dressed	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	YES	NO
2. Dawdles or lingers at mealtime	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	YES	NO
3. Has poor table manners	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	YES	NO
4. Refuses to eat food presented	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	YES	NO
5. Refuses to do chores when asked	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	YES	NO
6. Slow in getting ready for bed	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	YES	NO
7. Refuses to go to bed on time	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	YES	NO
8. Does not obey house rules on own	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	YES	NO
9. Refuses to obey until threatened with punishment	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	YES	NO
10. Acts defiant when told to do something	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	YES	NO
11. Argues with parents about rules	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	YES	NO
12. Gets angry when doesn't get own way	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	YES	NO
13. Has temper tantrums	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	YES	NO
14. Sasses adults	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	YES	NO
15. Whines	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	YES	NO
16. Cries easily	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	YES	NO
17. Yells or screams	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	YES	NO
18. Hits parents	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	YES	NO
19. Destroys toys and other objects	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	YES	NO
20. Is careless with toys and other objects	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	YES	NO
21. Steals	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	YES	NO
22. Lies	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	YES	NO
23. Teases or provokes other children	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	YES	NO
24. Verbally fights with friends own age	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	YES	NO
25. Verbally fights with sisters and brothers	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	YES	NO
26. Physically fights with friends own age	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	YES	NO
27. Physically fights with sisters and brothers	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	YES	NO
28. Constantly seeks attention	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	YES	NO
29. Interrupts	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	YES	NO
30. Is easily distracted	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	YES	NO
31. Has short attention span	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	YES	NO
32. Fails to finish tasks or projects	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	YES	NO
33. Has difficulty entertaining self alone	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	YES	NO
34. Has difficulty concentrating on one thing	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	YES	NO
35. Is overactive or restless	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	YES	NO
36. Wets the bed	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	YES	NO

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The following questions are developed to measure marital and life satisfaction.
Circle 3 if the statement is always true.
Circle 2 if the statement is somewhat true.
Circle 1 if the statement is rarely true.
Circle 0 if the statement is never true.

1. I feel good about the amount of involvement my spouse has with my children. 0 1 2 3

2. My spouse usually does not help enough with the children. 0 1 2 3

3. My spouse thinks parenthood is an important and valuable part of life which pleases me greatly. 0 1 2 3

4. My spouse has sufficient knowledge about child development which seems to make him/her comfortable as a parent. 0 1 2 3

5. I wish my spouse could do a better job parenting. 0 1 2 3

6. I am pleased with the amount of love and affection I receive from my children. 0 1 2 3

7. I am delighted with the relationship that I have with my children. 0 1 2 3

8. I am delighted with the relationship that my spouse has with the children. 0 1 2 3

9. My spouse is a perfectionist and expects too much from the children. 0 1 2 3

10. Generally my children obey me and this pleases me. 0 1 2 3

11. I wish I did not become impatient so quickly with my children. 0 1 2 3

12. I wish I were a better parent and could do a better job parenting. 0 1 2 3

13. I wish I gave my children more individual attention. 0 1 2 3

14. Having children causes many problems between a husband and wife. 0 1 2 3

15. I think my children will be a source of comfort and security in my old age. 0 1 2 3

16. Overall, I am not happy being a parent. 0 1 2 3

PARENTING SELF APPRAISAL SCALE

Please indicate your response using the following as a guideline:
1 = not at all; 2 = somewhat; 3 = moderately; 4 = very much; 5 = a great deal

1. I am confident in my parenting ability	1 2 3 4 5
2. I am aware of alternative ways of handling conflicts with my children.	1 2 3 4 5
3. I understand my children's needs, based on their age and developmental level.	1 2 3 4 5
4. As a parent, I have a good self-concept.	1 2 3 4 5
5. Parenting is extremely hard work, requiring conscious decision-making throughout the day	1 2 3 4 5
6. Children benefit from consistent rules.	1 2 3 4 5
7. Children benefit from firm limit setting.	1 2 3 4 5
8. Spanking increases children's respect for their parents.	1 2 3 4 5
9. Children need to be given options and opportunities to control their environment	1 2 3 4 5
10. Admitting mistakes to children usually scares and confuses them, and is therefore inadvisable.	1 2 3 4 5

DAILY BEHAVIORAL RESPONSES

Each of the following periods of the day invite conflicts between parents and children. Please reflect upon your day, and indicate how you responded to your children during each of these periods:

Morning Routine
Common Problem: _____
My Typical Response: _____
_____

Cleanup Time
Common Problem: _____
My Typical Response: _____
_____

Bedtime
Common Problem: _____
My Typical Response: _____
_____